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Of Bags and Brothers

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

At the inn, on the way back from Egypt, one of the brothers found a surprise in his sack: he still had his money.

And when one of them opened his sack to give feed to his donkey at the lodging place, he saw his money, for behold, it was in the mouth of the bag. And he said to his brothers: "My money has been returned! Behold it is here in my bag!" And their hearts failed them... (42:27-28)

The brothers are confused and bewildered. They do not understand how the money they paid for food has magically made its way back to the sack. In the normal way of things, the sack contains either grain or cash - never both.

While the brothers possess no clue as to the mysterious movement of their money, we the readers possess a bit more information. We know quite well how the money got back to the bag. Before sending the brothers back to Canaan, Yosef had commanded his men not only to "fill their sacks with grain" and "give them provisions for the journey," but also to "return each man's money to his sack" (42:25). In sum, Yosef has ordered it.

But this only shifts the confusion to another plane. Unlike the brothers, we understand the spatial and temporal placement of the money. We can trace the causal path that leads to its location. But we still don't really understand. We might know the how, but not the why. We might know the physics, but we don't know the psychology. Why has Yosef ordered that the money be returned? In other words, what is his motivation, the real cause of the money's location?

Part of the challenge of reading Parashat Miketz stems from the need to engage in a task that sometimes feels like a Rorschach test. The Torah presents us with Yosef, a character engaged in a clearly deliberate plan of action. At the same time, we are given almost no explicit information regarding the inner side of things, the reason for his behavior. Inevitably, we

attempt to fill in the missing information, projecting into the text what Yosef must be feeling and thinking.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. Part of the excitement of reading the narrative portions of the Bible stems from this invitation to explore the inner world of the characters. Yet it is an invitation we must accept with caution, recognizing that we no longer operate in the relatively clear and crisp realm of texts and events. We have shifted to another realm, a multi-faceted, multi-layered and murky space, a world of shifting and sometimes conflicting impulses. With this in mind, let us turn to trying to work through the layers of Yosef's heart and mind. Why indeed did he put the money in the bag?

II

Let us revisit Yosef's command to his servants and, for a moment, adopt the perspective of those who filled the sacks.

And Yosef gave orders to fill their sacks with grain, and to return each man's money to his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey; and so it was performed. (42:25)

Undoubtedly, the executors of the task considered the return of the money another example of their master's largesse. Despite his suspicion that the men from Canaan are spies, their master has provided the men with the food they wished to purchase. Moreover, he has also given them additional provisions for the journey. Finally, he has contrived to render all of this as a gift. He has charged them nothing. Their master is truly a merciful man.

Abarbanel maintains that this external perspective, the understanding of Yosef's men, constitutes the correct reading of Yosef's motivation. He acts out of concern, kindness and mercy. Although he must move ahead with his mysterious plan and he must imprison Shimon (42:24), he wishes to show kindness whenever possible. In a time of famine, cash is crucial. Perhaps his brothers don't have any more money. Perhaps it may take time to procure more cash. Either way, it is Yosef's concern for his family's finances that motivates his return of their money.

Various aspects of the text may well support this interpretation. Right before Yosef's command to fill the sacks, the Torah reports that Yosef cries (42:24). The crying comes in response to Yosef's overhearing of his brothers' stricken conscience, their confession of guilt for ignoring their brother's (i.e. his) pleading for mercy, and their attribution of their current plight to the events of twenty years past (42:21-23). The crying signals his renewed attachment to his brothers (see 41:51). He cares and is pained by what he is about to do. In line with this caring theme, and desperate to soften the blow of imprisoning Shimon, Yosef gives them back their money.

Finally, we may note another important marker in the story. The story of the money (42:18-28) begins with Yosef's freeing his brothers from three days in prison. Yosef presents a proposal to his brothers:

Do this and you shall live, for I fear God. If you are honest men, let one of you brothers be held in detention, and the rest of you may go and take food to your starving households. And your youngest brother bring to me... and you will not die... (42:18-19)

The Egyptian viceroy declares that he fears God. In consequence, he proposes a test and compromise. He suggests a way to provide life and avoid death.

The fear of God is a familiar concept in Avraham's family. Upon being confronted by Avimelekh and asked why he claimed that Sarah was his sister, Avraham responded, "I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place and they will kill me for my wife" (20:11). In turn, Avimelekh, wishing to prove Avraham wrong, invites him to stay in his land and gives him lavish gifts (20:15-16). In the tradition of Avraham, a lack of fear of God means a lack of hospitality, abuse of a powerless guest and the possibility of death. Fear of God means the opposite: acts of kindness, the granting of gifts and life.

When the "Egyptian viceroy" tells the brothers that he fears God, he presents a front. He must explain to them why he has freed them from prison and what has become of his accusations. At the same time, perhaps something else is going on. Behind the mask, the vizier identifies with the tradition of Avraham, and with his brothers standing in front of him, weak, powerless and facing the specter of death. He must help them. The least he can do is give them back their money.

Shifting over to the brothers' interpretation of the return of their money puts a radically different spin on Yosef's actions. After reporting the brothers' shock, the Torah tell us, "They trembled and said one to another: What is this that God has done to us?" (42:28). They do not view the finding of some spacash in the bag of one of the brothers as a good turn of luck. Consequently, when they return home and report to Ya'akov, they in fact omit any mention of the find (42:29-34). But they cannot keep things secret for long. Immediately after their report, they unpack their bags.

And it was as they emptied their sacks and behold, every man's bundle of money was in his sack, and when both they and their father saw the bundles of money, they were afraid. (42:35)

Once again, the brothers tremble with fear. For some reason or another the money spooks them. Its presence portends something bad. But what are they afraid of? Is it just a general anxiety, a natural fear of the unexpected?

In fact, the brothers are possessed by a very particular fear. Later on, upon returning to Egypt, they are whisked to the house of Yosef. They immediately conclude that it is "because of the money that we have been brought here" (43:18). It is all a plot to find "a pretext against us, fall upon us and take us for slaves" (43:18). From the brothers' perspective, the viceroy engages in a vicious game. First he accused them of spying and imprisoned them unjustly for three days (42:9-17). Unable to justify his accusations, he has feigned "fear of God" and set them free, offering a seemingly reasonable compromise. But all of this is just on the surface. In fact, he has guaranteed their return by keeping one brother imprisoned and simultaneously planted evidence of theft. He intends to accuse them of robbery upon their return and turn all of them into slaves.

While this may seem slightly paranoid, the brothers have good reason to be concerned about slavery. Throughout their ordeal, they continuously attribute their difficulties not to the evil of the Egyptian, but rather to God and their actions of twenty years past. As pointed out previously, upon finding the money in the sack, the brothers promptly ask, "What is this that God has done to us?" (42:28). They are concerned with divine motivation, rather than human machinations.

As mentioned above, upon being offered the deal by Yosef that subtly involves leaving a brother behind (42:19), the brothers quickly hark back in time.

And they said one man to his brother: "Alas, we are guilty concerning our brother, that we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us and we did not heed him, therefore this distress has come upon us." (42:21)

While the brothers prefer to talk about Yosef's pleading for mercy and their cruelty, Reuven, who had opposed acting against Yosef, refers to a far darker act. In responding to his brothers, Reuven claims, "Now his blood his sought" (42:22). In his eyes, they are responsible for Yosef's death and guilty of "murder."

Of course, the brothers, and we the readers, well know they have perpetrated the crimes of kidnapping and enslaving (37:23-28). In fact, some chance exists that they even know that the caravan of merchants to which they sold Yosef was headed for Egypt. No wonder they are concerned about being unjustly kidnapped and turned into Egyptian slaves. They are concerned with divine retribution for their sin, measure-for-measure punishment.

Perhaps this second perspective, the brothers' read of the situation, constitutes the key to understanding Yosef's motivation throughout the story. Back in the old days, Yosef reported on his brothers to his father. He revealed things the brothers would rather have concealed and they hated him for it (37:2, 8, Rashi 37:8). No doubt Yosef considered his spying justified and proper. But now the shoe is on the other foot. The brothers stand accused of spying (42:9-14).

Back in the old days, the brothers imprisoned Yosef in a pit (37:24) and eventually caused him to spend somewhere between two and thirteen years in an Egyptian jail (37:2, 41:1, 46, see 39:1-20). Now, here in Egypt, they are given a taste of prison. They all spend three days in jail, while Shimon, as group representative, receives a longer sentence (42:17, 19, 24). Finally, by putting the money back in the sacks, Yosef forces the brothers to contemplate the fate they imposed upon him. It is now they who face the prospect of unjust enslavement.

Assuming that Yosef, in putting the money in the bags, acts out of the desire to force upon his brothers this matrix of suffering, fear and contemplation, only gets us part of the way. We still must interpret. Is this just vengeance? Maybe. Or perhaps this is a strange kind of reverse empathy, in which he wishes to make them feel what he has felt, the crushing despair, anguish and anger of the unjustly accused and imprisoned. They now feel his pain. Or maybe, Yosef feels it is his job to punish them, to help them achieve atonement by structuring some kind of measure-for-measure punishment. In a bizarre psychological and theological twist, he provides them with some suffering, in order to propitiate divine anger and thereby "help them" (Abarbanel).

IV

The various intuitions and insights into Yosef's inner world can be thought of as separate and distinct. Alternatively, we can view these various motivations as co-existing within the inner space of Yosef's heart and mind. None seems sufficient without at least some part of another. Either way, even all this is insufficient to fully explain Yosef's placement of money in his brothers' bags.

Yosef returns his brothers their money not once, but twice in Parashat Miktetz. Near the end of the parasha, Yosef orders his head servant to place Yosef's silver cup in Binyamin's sack (44:2). He intends to ensnare Binyamin. In addition, he once again orders the placing of the money paid for grain into the sacks of Binyamin and his brothers. We should expect the motivation of the two cases to be similar, if not identical.

In this light, the second planting of money seems almost inexplicable. The planting of the cup alone is already sufficient cause for the enslavement of Binyamin and sufficient reason for the brothers to offer themselves as slaves (44:9-10). Moreover, the money in the bags plays no role in the actual accusations against Binyamin and the brothers' offer of group enslavement (44:12-17).

Moving away from a measure-for-measure theory of motivation and back to a pure kindness theory doesn't help explain this action. Even if Yosef wishes to make sure that the brothers are still financially solvent upon returning to Canaan, why place money in the bag of Binyamin (44:2)? He seems to intend keeping Binyamin in Egypt. Once again, what is Yosef thinking?

Perhaps the answer to the riddle of the money, both the second time around and even the first time around, lies in a third perspective present in the parasha. Let us take a look not at the perspective of Yosef's servants, nor at the perspective of the brothers, but rather at the point of view of Ya'akov.

As mentioned previously, upon returning back to Canaan after their first trip, the brothers deliver their report. They tell the tale of spying accusations and report the deal offered by "the man," requiring them to bring Binyamin in order to prove their honesty (42:30-34). Then they empty their bags, apparently in Ya'akov's sight, revealing the money lying beneath. Like the brothers, Ya'akov is afraid (42:35). While the guilt-stricken brothers fear divine retribution and enslavement, Ya'akov fears something altogether different. Upon seeing the money, Ya'akov critiques his sons and expresses his fear.

... You have bereaved me many times: Yosef is no more and Shimon is no more and now you will take Binyamin away; all these things have come upon me. (42:36)

Ya'akov fears losing Binyamin, the only remnant of his beloved Rachel and favorite Yosef. A few verses later, Ya'akov reformulates this in even sharper fashion. After Reuven's offer of his sons as hostages for the safety of Binyamin, Ya'akov emphatically states, "My son will not go down with you, for his brother is dead and he alone is left" (42:38). Ya'akov talks as if he has no other sons. Binyamin is "my son," the only one left, and apparently the only real son, defined as such by the death of Yosef.

Binyamin now plays the role previously played by Yosef. Just Yosef had always remained by his father's side (37:12-13), now Binyamin is his father's constant companion. While the other brothers went to Egypt to buy food, Binyamin, termed by the Torah "the brother of Yosef," stayed home with his father (42:4). But what does this have to do with the money? Why does Ya'akov voice his refusal, his fear and his focus on Binyamin in response to the cash?

At first glance, the answer seems simple. The presence of the money in the sacks is strange; it strikes the finders as portending something bad. In response, Ya'akov gives voice to a fear that has accompanied him ever since Yosef's disappearance and presumed death. Perhaps something will happen to Binyamin, perhaps an "accident will befall him on the way" (42:38).

Alternatively, on some level Ya'akov's fear revolves around something more specific than an ill-defined fear of disaster. He in fact makes no mention of the possibility of accident when first refusing to send Binyamin. Instead, he refers to "taking" Binyamin (42:36). Commenting on this verse, Rashi (42:36) states:

...this teaches that he suspected that perhaps they would kill him or sell him as they did to Yosef.

According to Rashi, Ya'akov not only suspects that the brothers had killed or sold Yosef, but also that they now plot to do the same to Binyamin.

While this may seem a bit extreme, the context of the brothers' report does support part of Rashi's claim. The brothers have returned from their mission partially successful. They have returned with sacks of grain. The downside is that in order to dispel the spying charges, the Egyptian viceroy has demanded to see Binyamin. On the logical plane, he has given goods (the grain) and demands "seeing" Binyamin as payment. This is precisely the meaning of the money still being in the bag. The grain has not been purchased by legal tender. Binyamin constitutes the real price that must be paid.

Seeing the money strikes Ya'akov like a hammer blow. He is confronted with a trade, not just Binyamin for the release of Shimon, but Binyamin for the grain, Binyamin for survival itself. It is this implicit placing of Binyamin on the trading block that triggers Ya'akov's fears.

This theme, drawn from Ya'akov's perspective, from his conscious or subconscious fears, appears implicitly again a bit later on. When the brothers leave for Egypt, Ya'akov orders them to "take in their hands," along with an offering, two distinct objects: the money and their brother. And so they do.

...And they took double money in their hand, and Binyamin; and they rose up, and went down to Egypt and stood before Yosef. (43:15)

But which is the real price they must pay, the money or their brother?

Finally, the issue of the sale of Binyamin surfaces one last time at the very end of the parasha. While the brothers are perfectly willing to endure group slavery, Yosef has something else in mind. He wants only Binyamin. The rest of the brothers can go home, with all their grain, with Shimon and with all their money. He implicitly offers them the chance to sell Binyamin, the other child of Rachel, into Egyptian slavery, just as they once had sold him into Egyptian slavery. He offers them a test, a chance either to repeat or to repent.

If so, we have arrived at an additional explanation for Yosef's placing of the money in his brothers' bags. By conjoining the giving of the money and the grain with the demand for Binyamin, Yosef recreates for his brothers a piece of their joint personal history. While this re-creation theme is more blatantly present the second time around, it is already present the first time around. Piece by piece, Yosef recreates the past, subtly building to a fateful moment. He tests his brothers, probes them, arouses their conscience, seeks their repentance and works for reconciliation.

In sum, we can add a third motif to the inner world of Yosef and the package of motivations for placing the money in the bag. Yosef is animated not just by sincere caring and kindness, not just by the creation of measure-for-measure suffering for his brothers, and not just by any possible mix of the two. In addition, he is animated by a genuine desire for reconciliation with his brothers. Consequently, he creates for them an echo of twenty years past, an opportunity to know their hearts, a test through which to elicit their repentance and truly reconcile. These are the causes of the money being in the bag.

V

Before closing, I would like to make a final point about motivation. Most discussions of Yosef's motivations in Parashat Miketz concentrate on different issues than those discussed above. For example, in exploring the issue of Yosef's motivation, Ramban points to the dreams. Building upon Yosef's remembering of his dreams upon seeing his brothers (42:9), Ramban argues that Yosef works throughout the story to have all eleven brothers, rather than just ten, bow down to him. This is why he must arrange to bring Binyamin to Egypt. By implication, the next step would have been to realize the next dream, the dream of the sun, moon and stars, symbolic of brothers and parents (37:9-10). On this account, Yosef's motivation might be thought of as metaphysical: he is chained to his dreams and his interpretation of future history.

In recent years a competing theory has surged in popularity. On this account, Yosef views himself as an expelled brother, akin to Yishmael or Esav. Yosef's immediate recollection of the dreams in response to his brothers' bowing down to him indicates Yosef's recognition that the dreams have come as true as they ever will. He had misinterpreted the dreams as a brash youth. He was never destined to be King of Israel. He, and by implication the sons of Rachel, were destined for Egypt, for a destiny of an altogether different kind than the blessings of Avraham. Consequently, he works throughout the story to bring Binyamin to him. He too must be sent away. Once again, Yosef is chained to metaphysics, his interpretation of future history and his vision of destiny.

On either account, the story of Yosef's actions in Parashat Miketz and Vayigash constitutes a tale of the tension between Yosef's commitment to history and destiny on the one hand, and his humanity, his mercy for his brothers, and his desire for reconciliation on the other. In this line of thought, Yosef's eventual self-revelation to his brothers constitutes almost a failure on his part, a point in time where he can no longer stick to his plan, where his humanity overwhelms his vision of destiny.

The reading of Parashat Miketz offered above comprises a radical alternative account of Yosef's attitude to dreams, history, metaphysics and destiny. Quite possibly, they never concern him. Remembering the dreams is not Yosef's first reaction upon finding his brothers before him. Rather, we are told not once, but twice that Yosef "recognized his brothers" (42:7-8). They are his brothers, with all that the fact implies. Then he remembers the dreams, literally, "the dreams that he dreamed to them" (42:9). He remembers his commitment to his destiny, his own arrogance, his insensitivity to his brothers' feelings and all the tortured path of their twisted relationship. It is this new "interpretation" of dreams and dreaming, that sometimes commitment to destiny as opposed to humanity can be an error, that leads to Yosef's actions in Parashat Miketz. Throughout the story, in a reversal of the Yosef of Parashat Vayeshev, he operates on the human and moral planes alone. He is concerned for his brothers and for their relationship, not for his dreams, nor his destiny.

For Further Study

1. Reread 42:1-6, paying special attention to the name given to the ten brothers. How does this foreshadow the crucial issues of the encounter in Egypt? See Rashi 42:3. In analyzing Rashi, see 37:15-19.
2. See 42:9. Read Rashi and Ramban. Which opinion seems more convincing? What crucial issue divides the two opinions? What is Ramban's strongest argument? What is

the weakest link in his argument (see Abarbanel)? If we do not accept Ramban's theory, how can we explain the fact that Yosef never contacted home in twenty?

3. See 44:16 and Ramban's comments. Why are the brothers so willing to accept slavery as long as it includes all of them? See 15:13-14.
4. Read Rashi's comments to 42:36. Can we find any textual basis for the claim that Ya'akov suspects his sons of fratricide? See 37:9-11 and 37:12-14. Compare to Parashat Vayishlach. See 32:4, 8-9, 12, 33:3-4 and 34:25-26. What constitutes the alternative to sibling reconciliation in the world of Ya'akov? What has previously occurred in Shechem?

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